

Rethinking the Categories of Working-Class History

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Volume 18, 1986

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt18re01>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Epstein, J. (1986). Compte rendu de [Rethinking the Categories of Working-Class History]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 18, 195–208.

REVIEW ESSAYS/ NOTES CRITIQUES

Rethinking the Categories of Working-Class History

James Epstein

Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983).

GARETH STEDMAN JONES' volume is composed of five essays published over the last decade. The author's increasing dissatisfaction with the explanatory force of the Marxist notion of class provides a unifying theme to the book. Each essay focuses upon the relationship between society and politics in nineteenth- and twentieth-century England. The English working class provided the initial empirical basis for Marx's universal theory of the development of industrial capitalism and proletarian consciousness. Therefore, as Stedman Jones observes, reflection upon the assumptions that have underpinned historical studies of this class may well claim more than parochial interest. Impressed by the lack of predictive authority of Marx's original vision, and critical of the ways in which left historians have derived the political from the social, Stedman Jones has recast some of the central questions of modern English history.

According to Stedman Jones, what historians have missed in their search to understand working-class history is the possibility that changes in political discourse itself, in the movement's terms of reference, rather than changes in "social being" explain shifts in political behaviour. In his introduction, Stedman Jones points to the difficulties historians have had in conceptualizing the relationship between the material determinants of working-class discontent and the actual political expression of class antagonism. What the concepts "consciousness" and "experience," often employed to mediate the relationship between the social and the political, conceal is "the problematic character of language." Language cannot be understood as merely providing the medium through which "experience" finds expression. Invoking the authority of Saus-

James Epstein, "Rethinking the Categories of Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 18 (Fall 1986), 195-208.

sure, Stedman Jones notes the materiality of language itself. Language does not merely refer back to social reality, it is part of the process through which we construct reality. Therefore, it is impossible to abstract "experience" "from the language that structures its articulation." (19-20) This volume charts the author's progress towards dissociating "the ambition of a theoretically informed history from any simple prejudgement about the determining role of the 'social' as something outside of, and logically . . . prior to its articulation through language." (7)

The conviction that the changing "languages of class" provide the keys to understanding the history of class itself informs only the most recent essays in this volume, "Rethinking Chartism" (1982) and "Why Is the Labour Party in a Mess?" (1982). This review concerns itself primarily with these two essays partly because it is difficult to know how seriously Stedman Jones now takes the arguments of earlier essays reproduced here but not based upon this more recent interpretative approach. As a whole, the volume reflects not only the author's own shifting theoretical perspectives, but underscores a more general crisis in meaning that pervades cultural and historical studies.

I

FOR MARX AND Engels, the significance of Chartism was as the world's first independent movement of the proletariat. Chartism announced the arrival of the agent of socialist transformation: the working class. For the young Engels, who had arrived in England in late 1842, whatever its formal political professions, Chartism's "essence" was that of a proletarian movement born of the new social relations of the Industrial Revolution and locked in dire class struggle with the bourgeoisie.

"Chartism is essentially a social movement," wrote Engels in 1845. His emphasis upon Chartism's social character as opposed to its specific political form shared the perspective of most contemporaries. Thus Thomas Carlyle maintained: "Chartism means the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad, the wrong condition therefore or the wrong disposition, of the Working Classes of England."¹

In "Rethinking Chartism," Stedman Jones registers his surprise that historians have continued to adopt an essentially "social" perspective in understanding Chartism. The interpretative costs of this approach are high, leading to:

the general neglect of the specific political and ideological form within which this mass discontent was expressed and the consequent tendency to elide the Chartist language of class with a range of Marxist or sociological notions of class consciousness. (93-4)

As an alternative, Stedman Jones proposed an investigation of Chartist political discourse within its own terms of reference, free of "a priori social inferences." What follows these opening remarks is the most sustained and coherent descriptive analysis yet of formal Chartist ideology. The essay also articulates a powerful critique of any simple understanding of the relationship between class and politics in early Victorian society. Finally, it offers an extremely plausible explanation for the eclipse of Chartism. Stedman Jones poses the question of what it means to describe Chartism as a "class" movement, answering in ways important to interpreting the subsequent history of English working people, developing arguments that resonate with much of the most exciting labour history of recent years.²

¹ Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Stanford 1958), 267. Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism* (London 1839), 2. For Carlyle's influence on Engels, see Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class* (New York 1975), 102-12.

² See, for instance, William H. Sewell, Jr.,

Stedman Jones starts with two general observations. First, he contends that what was truly remarkable about the Chartist movement was neither local divisions nor sociological differences, but rather Chartism's national dimensions and shared aims. Second, the movement was defined by its capacity to convince vast numbers of working people throughout Britain that various forms of social and cultural discontent could be resolved only through a realization of Chartism's political demands — most notably for universal (male) suffrage. This dual emphasis upon Chartism's national unity and political perspective is thoroughly consonant with recent revisionist work, particularly that of Dorothy Thompson and Iorwerth Prothero.³ What distinguishes Stedman Jones' analysis is his reconstruction of the continuities between Chartist "language" and the language of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century radicalism and the conclusions he draws from this reading.

Stedman Jones offers a compressed summary of the history of British political radicalism in order to establish the ideological lineages of Chartism. Radicalism emerged as a coherent programme in the 1770s with the Wilkesite agitation, and became a vehicle of plebeian political aspirations in the 1790s. By the late eighteenth century, a shift in emphasis from property to person widened radicalism's definition of the people.

The revolutionary experiences of America, Ireland, and most significantly France, lent an insurrectionist tone to English radicalism, and eventually led to its repression. In the wake of the Napoleonic wars, plebeian radicals recast the movement's vocabulary in response to new sources of social discontent. However, according to Stedman Jones, there was no sharp ideological break in political terminology; radicalism remained a "vocabulary of political exclusion whatever the social character of those excluded," and as such "it could never be the ideology of a specific class." (104) Following the passing of the 1832 Reform Bill, the "excluded" and the "working classes" took on an identity crucial to the emergence of Chartism; "the people" became "the working classes." Thus, Stedman Jones argued that "the language of class" was "the language of radicalism."⁴

Certain interpretative consequences follow from this reading. Stedman Jones maintains that a re-analysis that gives full weight to the actual language of Chartism allows the movement's rise and decline to be situated more precisely. Since the central tenet of radicalism remained an insistence on the political sources of social and economic discontent, Chartism depended upon specific conditions in which working people could perceive the state and the propertied classes in their legal and political role as the sources of all oppression. The movement was, therefore, peculiarly vulnerable to shifts in the state's attitude towards certain social reforms. Once the state could no longer be perceived as being unreservedly oppressive and incapable of reform, the political language of

Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848 (Cambridge 1980); Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1984); Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class and the American Labor Movement, 1790-1920," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 26 (Fall 1984), 1-24.

³ Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists* (New York 1984); Iorwerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London* (Folkestone 1979).

⁴ This line of reasoning owes much to I.J. Prothero, "William Benbow and the Concept of the 'General Strike,'" *Past and Present*, 63 (1974), 132-71; and T.M. Parssinen, "Association, Convention and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics, 1771-1848," *English Historical Review*, 88 (1973), 504-33.

Chartism lost credibility. From this perspective Chartism was the product of a conjunctural "moment" in English history.

This interpretation suggests a new way of understanding the stability of mid-Victorian England. In radical discourse the primary distinction drawn was not that between employer and employed, but rather that between the unrepresented, the people, and the represented, the privileged. Hostility to the middle classes was not directed to their role in the production process, but to their participation in a corrupt and oppressive political system. The producers of wealth were exploited through the mechanisms of the state. According to Stedman Jones, "there was no independent rationale within radical ideology for antagonism towards the middle class as such." (107) Chartism's precipitate decline preeminently demonstrates the limit beyond which radical ideology could not be stretched without losing its internal coherence. Chartism could not survive the retreat of the Victorian state from its exposed position of the 1830s.

Stedman Jones does not deny the existence of intense Chartist hostility towards the employing class, particularly towards the northern factory owners, but rather contends that there was no theoretical basis for such hostility within radical discourse independent of middle-class participation in a corrupt political system. He explores, for instance, the thesis that the writings of Hodgskin, Gray, Thompson, and Bray — previously and incorrectly labelled "Ricardian socialists" — imparted a "new ideology" of capitalist exploitation to working-class radicalism.⁵ Important radical journals such as the

Poor Man's Guardian (1831-5) and the *Northern Star* (1837-52), Chartism's most prominent newspaper, on occasion incorporated aspects of these writers' analyses. However, in "Ricardian socialist" literature, economic exploitation takes place not at the point of production but rather through the mechanisms of a system of unequal exchange and distribution; a system which was politically derived and maintained. Such an analysis directed hostility not towards the employer but rather towards the traditional foes, the landlord and the money lord, posing the fundamental division within society as between the idle and the industrious. Stedman Jones concludes more generally that "it should not... be assumed that the radical analysis that lay behind the Charter was in the course of displacement by a different and more class conscious mode of thought." (153) New themes and emphases emerged, but Chartist language was more closely linked to the vocabulary of radicalism than to that of the "class-based language of socialism."

Chartism's strategy of action and consistent rejection of overtures for an alliance with sections of the middle class offer possible counterpoints to this view of the movement's lack of theoretical rigour. However, Stedman Jones notes that Chartist rejections of middle-class initiatives had less to do with the question of the desirability of such support than with the terms upon which middle-class support could be secured. Indeed, the Chartist strategy for 1839, the most important year of the movement's history, sought to mobilize the vast majority of the "people," including a substantial portion of the middle classes, against the state and its "parasitic" supporters. Stedman Jones thus comments that the Chartist National

⁵ Patricia Hollis, *The Pauper Press* (Oxford 1970), 203-53, for the distinction between the "old" and "new" analysis. See Noel W. Thompson, *The People's Science: The Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis, 1816-34* (Cambridge 1984), for a full revision

of the place of the "Ricardian socialists" and their impact on working-class thought.

Petition and the "general Convention of the Industrious Classes" "were not premissed upon proletarian politics." (161) Stedman Jones argues that the failure of Chartist strategy in 1839, and the lack of middle-class support, called into question any simple notion of the unity of the people. If 1839 demonstrated the inadequacy of a radical strategy for political change modelled upon the successful middle-class reform movement of 1831-2, then the defeats of 1842 demonstrated the shortcomings of a new tactic, a mass industrial strike for political ends. The movement's early, and most insurgent, years dramatized the central contradiction of Chartism: a movement almost exclusively working-class in composition pursued a strategy of mobilization rooted in the terms of radical, as opposed to "proletarian" socialist, ideology.

Stedman Jones offers a compelling interpretation of the Chartist movement. From the long-term perspective, Chartism appears less as the culmination of the "making of the English working class" and more as the impressive last manifestation of a radical political tradition stretching back to the eighteenth century. Chartism's specific character was defined by the 1832 Reform Bill which resulted in the equation of "the people" with the working class. There was a corresponding shift in the relationship between the state and the working class. The Whig legislation which followed 1832, particularly the new Poor Law and the Rural Police Act, imparted an image of the state "as the tyrannical harbinger of a dictatorship over the producers... a powerful and malevolent machine of repression, at the behest of capitalists and factory lords... As a conjunctural phenomenon, Chartism represented the rapid upsurge and gradual ebbing away of this specific vision of the state." (173-4)

II

STEDMAN JONES convincingly pursues the notion that language is as "real" as the

social forces of production, and similarly that any systematic political vocabulary, or "ideology," possesses inherent limits. Perhaps it is not surprising, however, that so ambitious a reappraisal should leave certain questions not fully resolved, especially in its handling of the concepts of language and class consciousness, and the relationship between these two extraordinarily complex categories of understanding.

To begin with, the argument never really confronts the question of what constitutes Chartist "language." In a footnote Stedman Jones disclaims any intention of offering an exhaustive analysis. "What is examined here is only the public political language of the movement." (95) Such a restricted concept of language, however, deprives us of certain meanings, particularly meanings imparted through symbolic action and contest. The public language of Chartism was preeminently the language of the mass platform. It was through the great "monster" demonstrations at Kersal Moore outside of Manchester or Peep Green in Yorkshire that hundreds of thousands of working-class men, women, and children came to feel an identity of interests, and were able to sense the scale and power of their movement. Chartist language cannot be fully understood outside the rituals and collective solidarities of this context.

Furthermore, it is unclear whether an approach which shares much in common with the protocols of intellectual history can help us to understand the meaning of the event itself. Throughout Lancashire, employers threatened factory workers with dismissal if they attended the Kersal Moor demonstration. The meeting was held on a Monday, a working day in the mills but not in many artisanal trades. What does it mean when 20,000 factory workers then lay siege to their factory town by night? At torchlight meetings held in Lancashire during winter 1838, speeches recommending universal arming were punctuated by pistol volleys; the

meetings were preceded by torchlight processions that paraded past the employers' mills. Such actions dramatically underscored the isolation of the mill owner and the physical vulnerability of the mill. In December 1838, at the factory town of Ashton-under-Lyne, the mill of a much despised factory owner and magistrate was burnt to the ground in highly suspicious circumstances.⁶ At a public meeting several weeks before, the Rev. J.R. Stephens, Ashton's "political preacher," had issued an apparent warning to this factory "tyrant." Despite the prospect of winter's unemployment, the factory hands who watched the mill burn declined to help put out the fire, cheering as the flames reached each story. To note in passing that there was Chartist hostility to factory owners, but that it found no adequate lodgement in Chartist theory, does not quite recapture the "consciousness" of these factory hands nor fully explain the reduced social tensions in these towns at mid-century.

Nor was even the public language of Chartism as coherent as Stedman Jones implies. There is no sustained treatment of the language of either the factory or the anti-Poor Law movements, arguably more important to the origins of northern Chartism than the writings of the Ricardian socialists. These movements pioneered the rhetoric of violence that leaders brought into early Chartism.⁷ The language of these movements gave a sharp moral edge to denunciations of the "millocrats." Eileen Yeo has also demonstrated the centrality of various forms of Christian reasoning to Chartist discourse and action. Such forms of rhetoric and

reasoning were not discrete "languages." In winter 1838, for instance, Stephens preached a series of sermons proving through scriptures that it was the duty of "Englishmen" to be armed.⁸ Regardless of whether such sermons imparted a more "class-based" theoretical understanding to Chartism, the movement's intimidating tone, the "raw head and bloody bones" of Chartism, provided the ostensible reason for many middle-class radicals' refusal to support the cause.⁹

Most significantly, Stedman Jones fails to acknowledge fully the essential instability of the terms of public political discourse. The term "the people" (or "property" or "patriot" or "industrious") had a range of meanings within Chartist discourse, but more importantly these meanings were constructed in opposition to the accent given by other social groups. Introducing the Reform Bill, Lord John Russell declared his purpose to transform the House of Commons into "a body of men who represent the people." If Chartists equated "the people" with the working classes, this contrasted sharply to Henry Brougham's celebrated equation: "By the people, I mean the middle classes, the wealth and intelligence of the country, the glory of the British name."¹⁰ Surely here is a struggle to appropriate, and from the Chartist perspective to destabilize, the meaning of a key sign within the repertoire of English political discourse. There seems little reason not to regard this as a form of class struggle.

⁶ Letter from Ashton magistrates, 10 December 1838, PRO, Home Office, 40/38, fos. 558-60.

⁷ For the rhetoric of violence, see Dorothy Thompson, *The Early Chartists* (London 1971), 16-23; James Epstein, *The Lion of Freedom: Frergus O'Connor and the Chartist Movement* (London 1982), 116-27.

⁸ Eileen Yeo, "Christianity in Chartist Struggle, 1838-42," *Past and Present*, 91 (1981), 109-39; *Stockport Advertiser*, 14 December 1838.

⁹ Matthew Fletcher, *Letters to the Inhabitants of Bury* (Bury 1852), letter 4, 8; also see Henry Solly, *These Eighty Years* (London 1893), vol. 1, 344-5.

¹⁰ Cited in Asa Briggs, "The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth-Century England," in Asa Briggs and John Saville, eds., *Essays in Labour History* (London 1967), 55.

Indeed, struggles to appropriate the terms and symbols of a "shared" political discourse are probably more common than those between two sharply antithetical systems of political reasoning. Stedman Jones' emphasis on the relatively autonomous force of language, and the continuities of linguistic forms, underestimates the intense conflict that often surrounds the social construction of language. Whether this conflict merits the preface "class" requires an approach that goes beyond the formalism of "Rethinking Chartism."

This is not to deny the importance of Chartism's ideological inheritance. As J.G.A. Pocock has noted, political references are characterized by their multivalence.¹¹ The ambiguity of the term "the people" — its openness — was part of its attraction. Stedman Jones sees this ambiguity as a limitation, but it was also a strength. It offered the highest potential for large-scale mobilization. In order to understand the "language" of Chartism, we need to comprehend how the movement reached out in an attempt to universalize its politics and culture. Thus, at Chartist public dinners, working-class radicals toasted "patriotic" martyrs of British republicanism, such as Hampden and Sydney, alongside heroes of the French and American revolutions. Dinners to celebrate the anniversary of Paine's birth or the Peterloo massacre, "the never to be forgotten 16th of August, 1819," were attempts to reconstruct through ritual a popular national history.¹²

Chartists certainly entertained the possibility of attracting middle-class suppor-

ters to their ranks. Stedman Jones makes two points almost in passing that require greater emphasis in order to understand Chartist attitudes towards the middle class. First, Chartists carefully distinguished between the interests of various sections of the middle class. There was no question of an alliance with large-scale employers; Chartists directed attention to the possible conversion of sections of the "shopocracy," or lower middle class, those most dependent on working-class custom and most vulnerable to the encroachments of large-scale capital. Chartists postulated an identity of economic interests that might offset the sharp political polarities established by the 1832 Reform Act. Second, Chartists were uncompromising in their insistence that such middle-class allies join the radical movement upon working-class terms. Thus, in response to overtures from the middle-class Leeds Parliamentary Reform Association in 1840, the *Northern Star* declared: "The middle-classes will never again be permitted to take the lead in any great movements. The background is their place, and they must be made to know it and keep it."¹³ Chartist leaders such as Feargus O'Connor sought to incorporate a section of the middle class within the movement, but demanded that shopkeepers accept the political programme, leadership, and organization of a working-class movement. What was distinctive about the Chartist period was thus the assertion of the independent power of an organized working-class movement. This is what impressed Engels in the early 1840s.

For Stedman Jones the crucial point is that Chartist language, or more accurately, formal ideology, was not founded upon a full socialist understand-

¹¹ J.G.A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time* (New York 1973), 17-25.

¹² See Hugh Cunningham, "The Language of Patriotism, 1750-1914," *History Workshop*, 12 (1981), 8-33; also see Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London 1979), 181-2.

¹³ *Northern Star*, 19 December 1840, 4; Epstein, *Lion of Freedom*, 263-93, for a full discussion of this issue.

ing of the nature of capitalist exploitation. However, to move from this point to the notion that the movement was not a "class" movement or that it lacked class consciousness of some higher order seems to whisper gently "false consciousness, comrades." Presumably this is not Stedman Jones' intention, since elsewhere he rejects "false consciousness" as a useful category of historical understanding. Stedman Jones' discussion underscores the general difficulties that inhabit the term "working-class consciousness," a term subject to such imprecision as to render it meaningless outside any highly specific historical context. At a very minimum we need to acknowledge degrees of class or class consciousness. But even such an acknowledgement assumes some standard against which to measure consciousness. Stedman Jones measures a pre-Marxist movement for democratic political rights against a Marxist theory over which the working class have inheritance rights largely through ascription, and discovers, perhaps not surprisingly, that certain things do not fit.

The difficult question remains as to whether there is a fit between "social" reality (or the "real" conditions of economic production and exploitation) and political language. Stedman Jones comments that his approach is not meant to imply that the social conditions of existence of Chartist language were arbitrary. His intent is not to replace a social interpretation with a linguistic interpretation, "rather it is how the two relate, that must be rethought." (95) It is unclear, however, how his "non-referential conception of language" (22) can accommodate the dynamic interplay between changing social relations and political language.¹⁴ One difficult but promising

approach is to explore shifts in the meanings of key political terms in relationship to changes within the workshop. For instance, historians have often assumed that the conditions of production in the small workshops of Birmingham were peculiarly conducive to cross-class political cooperation. However, Clive Behagg has convincingly argued that economic changes undermined the language of mutual class interests employed by the middle-class leaders of the Birmingham Political Union. The concept of the "productive" or "industrious" classes, infused with a particular class meaning by radical merchants, lost its vitality by the late 1830s "because the class unity it implied was increasingly at odds with work-place reality."¹⁵

More generally, Chartist notions of exploitation often conformed rather closely to actual conditions of production. In an earlier essay reproduced in this collection, "Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution" (1974), Stedman Jones notes that the "Ricardian socialist" theory of unequal exchange described a situation that most closely corresponded to that of the depressed artisan or outworker — the very groups from which Chartism drew the majority of its support. The notion that he was exploited through relationships of unequal exchange might appear quite cogent to a London tailor, for example.¹⁶

¹⁴ For a critique of Stedman Jones' use of linguistic theory, see John Foster, "The De-classing of Language," *New Left Review*, 150 (1985), 38-41.

¹⁵ Clive Behagg, "An Alliance with the Middle Class: the Birmingham Political Union and Early Chartism," in James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson, eds., *The Chartist Experience* (London 1982), 69; also *id.*, "Custom, Class and Change: the Trade Societies of Nineteenth Century Birmingham," *Social History*, 4 (1979), 455-80. For a study which has far-reaching importance for these questions, see Michael Sonenscher, "The *Sans-culottes* of the Year II: Rethinking the Language of Labour in Pre-Revolutionary France," *Social History*, 9 (1984), 301-28.

¹⁶ See T.M. Parssinen and J.J. Prothero, "The London Tailors' Strike of 1834 and the Col-

The low wages and low prices of shops catering for the ready-made market undermined the tailors' limited security. Increasingly, they worked outside the shelter of the dwindling and embattled "respectable" sector of the trade. The "dung" tailor often worked in a home garret with wife and children. The "slop" warehouse for which he worked controlled the distribution of the finished product, but did not directly control the process of production. The tailor's wage form was usually that of a price paid for commodities sold rather than for labour power surrendered. There were strong reasons beyond those of linguistic heritage, then, why such degraded "artisans" failed to recognize themselves as "proletarians" exploited at the point of production.

Wide diversities in the organization of production and in the form of payment during this period make moving from description of the social relations of production to discussion of political language tricky. Stedman Jones' powerful reminder that language itself has determining force compounds the difficulties posed for an integrated historical understanding of language and the labour process. Yet at the heart of Chartism there was a social vision which was essentially artisanal in inspiration. The resonance of the term "independent" was more than the faint echo of excluded Tory squires of the eighteenth century. A general concern for the progressive loss of the last vestiges of artisanal independence found expression within Chartist language and action. The Chartist Land Plan, a scheme to place urban workers on small plots, was a desperate attempt to give reality to this vision. Among the strongest early supporters of the Land Plan were Lancashire factory workers. Locked within factory walls,

cotton spinners shared artisanal aspirations for control within the workplace. In his earlier essay, "Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution," Stedman Jones suggests that there was a point in the development of industrial capitalism after which an artisanal vision could no longer sustain the collective aspirations of working-class radicalism. Such aspirations were carried into mid-Victorian England not as an alternative view of society, but rather as the narrowed perspective of those skilled workers able to defend their sectional interests. Stedman Jones now feels that the vague realization of the permanence of industrial capitalism is too imprecise a phenomenon for fixing the moment of Chartism's decline. It may still be important, however, as a condition governing the character of mid-Victorian working-class politics, although Stedman Jones makes no such claim.

Stedman Jones looks quite rightly to a national rather than a sectional shift in the horizons of working people in order to explain Chartism's decline, although he now locates this shift within a more or less autonomous political sphere. Yet Chartists refused to separate the social from the political; they regarded social relations of domination and subordination as ultimately enforced through the agency of the state. This understanding allowed Chartists to integrate a series of social, industrial, and cultural demands within an all-embracing political movement. By directing attention to the changing visage of the state, Stedman Jones makes a major advance towards understanding the erosion of this integrated vision. The slowing down of the installment of local police forces and the softening of the more obnoxious aspects of the new Poor Law certainly constituted a mellowing of the earlier aggressiveness of the state.

More questionable is the suggestion that Peel's orchestration of the retreat of the state in the service of his conception of moralized capitalism was in itself sufficient to the task of disarming Chartism.

First, by treating the state more or less autonomously, Stedman Jones ignores the range of accommodative strategies pursued within civil society. We need to know more about how changes in government posture were mediated locally, and about the ways in which various social, economic, and cultural aims were detached from the highly politicized core of Chartism.¹⁷ Second, Stedman Jones maintains that as a coherent political vision, Chartism began to disintegrate in the early 1840s. The notion that the prosperity of mid-century undermined Chartism no longer seems tenable. However, Chartism's decline also pre-dates the legislation most crucial to undermining the Chartist argument that key social reforms were impossible without a parliament elected on the basis of universal suffrage; namely, Peel's repeal of the Corn Laws (1846) and the passage of the Ten Hours Bill (1847) which the Peelites opposed. Furthermore, the Ten Hours Act was largely inoperative with regard to adult factory workers since the act failed to outlaw relay systems of young workers. We need to take measure of the limitations of the reforming impulse of the 1840s and of middle-class attitudes of conciliation.

Finally, the "liberalized" state was Janus-faced. Thus, 1848 witnessed a more fundamental abridgement of the constitutional rights of "freeborn Englishmen" than 1839. Authorities occupied meeting places with troops to forestall scheduled Chartist rallies; on several occasions, they also banned Chartist processions. These were state powers not previously employed against Chartists. In the same year (1848), the Crown and Government Security Act — the "Gagging Act" — introduced a new charge making seditious

utterance a transportable offence. Chartists faced a governing class confident in the exercise of its power, secured by the reform settlement of 1832, and the loyalty of the military. The fine blending of repression and concession, the firm posture of preparedness without needless provocation, exposed the limitations of Chartism's dominant strategy of action. The repeated failures of national petitions, mass demonstrations, and general conventions eroded confidence in a repertoire of constitutionalist mobilization legitimated within the terms of a language Stedman Jones has so critically illuminated. As Stedman Jones' own essay suggests, the experience of defeat as well as the tactical retreat of the state structured working-class notions of what was possible during "Peel's decade."

Chartism marked the final flourishing of a certain type of popular movement that was neither socialist in its ideology nor indicative of an emergent socialist direction within working-class politics. The non-socialist preoccupations of this class and the discontinuities within the peculiar history of British socialism impress Stedman Jones. The conditions of working-class containment and the failure of the British working class to fulfill what Stedman Jones regards as a misconceived promise of youth provide central themes to the remainder of this volume.

III

STEDMAN JONES SEES a defensive "conservatism" as being the political and cultural hallmark of the modern English working class. For Stedman Jones, the British working class was present at its own containment, part of a process of defensive withdrawal. In his justly influential study, *Working-Class Culture and Working Politics... Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class*, (1974) he persuasively points to the late nineteenth century as a founding moment of pro-

¹⁷ See, for instance, John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London 1974), 203-50; Trygve Tholfsen, *Working-Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (London 1976), 124-54.

found significance to British society.¹⁸ He finds a reconstituted working class, conservative in outlook and impervious to middle-class influences. There was nothing inherently radical in this "life apart." On the contrary

this impermeability no longer reflected any widespread class combativity. For the most prominent developments . . . were the decay of artisan radicalism, the marginal importance of socialism, the largely passive acceptance of imperialism and the throne, and the growing usurpation of political and educational interests by a way of life centered around the pub, the race course and the music hall. In sum its impermeability to the classes above it was no longer threatening or subversive, but conservative and defensive. (215)

In the wake of Chartism's defeat, the English working class no longer possessed an alternative vision of society. "Capitalism had become an immovable horizon." (237)

Here, as in "Rethinking Chartism," Stedman Jones identifies a major qualitative break, or "rupture," in the history of British society, and, therefore, alerts us to something beyond notions of continuity and discontinuity. However, in demonstrating that the working class was not "made" once and for all between 1789 and 1832, he implies that the working class was recast within a more or less permanent mould in the late nineteenth century. In his most recent essay, "Why Is the Labour Party in a Mess?" Stedman Jones explicitly reasserts this monolithic view of conservative working-class consciousness:

Class consciousness in twentieth century Brit-

ain has been a conservative rather than a revolutionary phenomenon. The consciousness of the working class from 1900 to 1950 — summed up more by music-hall, cinema, sport, pubs, working-men's clubs and distinctions of accent, residence and dress than by chapel, trade unionism or labour politics — was the consciousness of the separateness of a caste rather than that of the hegemonic potentialities of a particular position in production. (246-7)

It is difficult to assess the status of such a statement. It remains unclear, for instance, how this perspective can accommodate the "syndicalist" temper of the great strike wave of 1910-4 or the post-war insurgency of 1918-26. Was this "conservative" or not "class conscious?" Because workers have not been consistently aware of "hegemonic potentialities," the separateness of their culture is not rendered unremittently "conservative." Within the enclosed boundaries of working-class culture and politics there was also nurtured a spirit of revolt born of conditions of separation, alienation, and exploitation.¹⁹ The terms "conservative" and "revolutionary" are blunt instruments of analysis. They provide no categories for understanding the actual forms and meanings of industrial resistance most typical of British workers in the twentieth century.

The entrenched conservatism of working-class political culture carries important implications for Stedman Jones' account of the past and future of British socialist politics. Incorporating an understandably pessimistic appraisal of post-World War II British socialism, and denying by implication the primacy of organized labour in the socialist politics of the future, "Why Is the Labour Party in a Mess?" deals with a pressing concern of the British left. This essay forms part of a larger debate carried on since the Conser-

¹⁸ For the formative importance of this period, also see Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" In Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London 1981), 227-31; Eric Hobsbawm, *Workers: Worlds of Labour* (New York 1984), 176-213; James E. Cronin, *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain* (London 1979), 192-5, for something of a counterview to Stedman Jones.

¹⁹ See Richard Price, *Masters, Unions and Men* (Cambridge 1980), 237; Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism, 1900-1914* (London 1976).

vative electoral victory of 1979 in journals such as *Marxism Today*, *New Socialist*, and *New Statesman* — a debate concerned with the defection of significant sections of the British working class from an allegiance to the Labour Party and with the popular appeal of "Thatcherism." An eloquent piece of iconoclasm, Stedman Jones' essay has the virtue of situating the present crisis of the British Labour Party within a longer-term historical perspective. Consistent with his new theoretical emphasis, Stedman Jones argues that there is no obvious way in which the course of British politics since 1951 could be deduced from social conditions, or the "objective" sociological realities of class, pertaining during these years. Crucially important are the ways in which the available terms of political discourse impart meaning to social change. The essay itself, however, does not offer the sort of sustained analysis of political language found in "Rethinking Chartism."

Most strikingly, Stedman Jones takes issue with Eric Hobsbawm's essay "The Forward March of Labour Halted?" which has become the focal point of much political reevaluation from the British left.²⁰ Stedman Jones maintains that the title's metaphor is itself misconceived, "an optical illusion . . . part of the social democratic mythology of Labour in the 1940s." The history of the Labour Party needs to be understood as a series of "discontinuous conjunctures which enabled it to achieve particular and specific forms of success at rather widely separated points of time, rather than as a continuous evolutionary movement which at a certain point mysteriously went into reverse." (243)

The most generally perceived point of

"mysterious" reversal is 1951. Labour's successes of 1945-51 have taken on a particularly warm glow; these years constitute a sort of golden age from which Labour descends. Stedman Jones prefers to see these years as a highly specific, and not particularly typical, moment in Labour Party history, when Labour was able to reverse its former inability to forge the sort of alliance necessary for electoral victory.²¹ The experience of World War II generated the conditions for a popular alliance between the organized working class and the progressive forces of the professional middle class. But the professional middle-class vision of social reform had little to do with a faith in the intelligence or agency of working people, but was rooted rather in an élitist ethos of service. Stedman Jones notes that the actual policies of Labour in power — American loans, foreign policy governed by Cold War ideology and notions of Britain's imperial role, the public corporation approach to nationalization — all testified to a continuity with the assumptions of pre-1914 progressive liberal imperialism.

Labour's post-war triumphs were achieved most certainly at the point at which large sections of the electorate perceived Labour as a "national" rather than as a class party. However, one cannot move from the assumptions governing the politics of Beveridge and Keynes to the motivations stirring middle-class voters on election day. Stedman Jones' interpretation suffers from both its abbreviated character and the closure it imposes upon other meanings than those suggested. The world of post-war Labour politics was more varied than he implies. There were a goodly number of Labour MPs and party intellectuals whose politics transcended a liberal dedication to a service ethos. Others, as Stedman Jones reminds us,

²⁰ Hobsbawm's essay, first published in *Marxism Today*, (September 1978), is reproduced as part of a wide-ranging debate in Eric Hobsbawm, et al., *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London 1981).

²¹ Cf. James E. Cronin's comments in his excellent *Labour and Society in Britain, 1918-1979* (London 1984), 7-14, and 134-208 in general.

who were most often in control of party policy, were perhaps dedicated to little else. Stedman Jones' concluding judgement that the Labour Party government represented "the last and most glorious flowering of late Victorian liberal philanthropy," (246) is in danger of being reduced to a platitude of new left revisionism. This is unfortunate, particularly if it forecloses other meanings. While Stedman Jones brilliantly encapsulates something of the intent of the designers of the "welfare state," the Labour government's reforms took on different meaning for many people. Rather than a form of philanthropy, such reforms became part of an enlarged notion of citizenship — a matter of right rather than philanthropic largesse channelled through the state.

Stedman Jones proceeds to discuss briefly, but suggestively, the dissolution of the post-war Labour alliance. He charts the lines of fragmentation and the decline of class consciousness that have occurred within both the middle and working classes over the last three decades. New forms of radicalism — Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, students' movement, environmental and community politics, and, most fundamentally, the women's movement — divided the middle class against itself. These movements grew up outside the Labour Party in the 1960s and 1970s and had an appeal for significant sections of the working class. At the same time, Stedman Jones notes that the linkage often assumed to exist between wage militancy and working-class politics appears increasingly tenuous. It is no longer axiomatic that trade unionists will vote Labour, as the 1983 election dramatically demonstrated. Stedman Jones offers no programme for reknitting Labour's alliance beyond observing that the party's ability to forge new unifying strategies is thwarted by historically bound preconceptions about its constituency:

the perception of one part of its constituency as

a homogeneous proletarian estate whose sectional interest is encompassed by trade unions, and of the other part as a heteroclitic aggregate of idealists, notables or entrists to be humoured, promoted or circumvented. (256)

Rethinking the categories of Labour's history is now a necessary correlate to rethinking Labour's future. "Why Is the Labour Party in a Mess?" is part of a more general appeal associated with *History Workshop* for a new kind of history of the Labour Party and socialism, one that moves outside narrow institutional parameters and is free of evolutionary notions of Labour's historical unfolding.²² It is a timely call to recognize the discontinuities in Labour's past and the political forces which have operated outside the party but which have been important to its history and to the course of British socialism. One question that might profitably be explored in such a broadened view is the extent to which British social democracy ever incorporated the sort of "movement culture" associated with Chartism, or, for instance, with the pre-1914 German Social Democratic Party or the post-1945 Italian Communist Party. Consideration of the conditions of the existence and waning of such cultural initiatives may well be important to understanding the meanings that socialist and Labour Party politics have held for working people.²³

As this volume amply demonstrates, Stedman Jones is among the most gifted intellectuals on the British left. His work possesses a rare capacity to disrupt the set-

²² See "The Labour Party and Social Democracy," editorial, *History Workshop*, 12 (1981), 1-7; Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Labour Party and Social Democracy," in Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, eds., *Culture, Ideology and Politics* (London 1982), 320-9.

²³ For an important contribution along these lines, see Raphael Samuel, ed., *Theatres of the Left: Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and America, 1880-1935* (London 1985).

tled boundaries of our historical understanding. One of the great strengths of these essays is the sustained critique of the teleological aspects of Marxist theory. Despite reservations about the appropriateness of some of Stedman Jones' formulations, he is certainly correct to remind us that the English, and more generally the European, working class has not proved to be the "universal" class of classical Marxism, the sole and distinct bearer of the transformative promise of socialism: the class whose own liberation signalled the liberation of humankind. This does not imply that the dense network of working-class institutions — trade unions, cooperatives, socialist and labour journals — have not possessed or possess no longer the capacity for oppositional struggle. Stedman Jones also poses in most powerful terms the difficult question of the ordering of the relationship

between "social being" and "social consciousness." The exact role of language within this relationship (both determining and determined, producing and produced) remains problematic. Clearly one cannot choose at will a political discourse, at least not with the expectation that it can mobilize politically large numbers of people. Nor do the inherited terms of political discourses that have had such power in the past possess fixed or purely structured meanings, but rather are themselves part of the contested terrain of politics and culture.

I would like to thank Cynthia Herrup, Paul Krause, and William Reddy for their comments on an earlier draft of this review, and Joseph White for his thoughtful comments on some of the problems addressed here.